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ABSTRACT

A number of factors came together in the 1970s to create a social problem called "battered wives". Then, beginning in 1977, there was an attempt to create a social problem called "battered husbands." So far, such attempts have been unsuccessful. This analysis compares the issue of battered husbands and battered wives to determine why one was successfully constructed as a social problem while the other was not. The development of the two issues is delineated, and then compared. The results of the comparison show that the factors that were present in the construction of battered wives as a social problem--a social movement, professional and mass media attention, and appropriate gender images--were not present for battered husbands. The existence of the feminist movement and the battered women's movement helped establish battered wives as a social problem while gender images supported the notion of women as appropriate and acceptable victims of violence by their husbands. These findings suggest that a climate that supported the existence and maintenance of one of these social problems could not, and has not, supported the institutionalization of the other. (Author/BF)

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BATTERED HUSBANDS AND BATTERED WIVES: WHY ONE IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM AND THE OTHER IS NOT*

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ABSTRACT

BATTERED HUSBANDS AND BATTERED WIVES:

WHY ONE IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM AND THE OTHER IS NOT

A number of factors came together in the 1970s to create a social problem called "battered wives". Then, beginning in 1977, there was an attempt to create a social problem called "battered husbands". So far, such attempts have been unsuccessful. This analysis compares the issues of battered husbands and battered wives to determine why one was successfully constructed as a social problem while the other was not. Using a qualitative analysis of the existing literature on the two issues, their paths of development are compared using a constructionist perspective on social problems. This perspective focuses on claims and claims makers and on responses to claims about an issue. The development of the two issues is delineated, and then compared. The results of the comparison show that the factors that were present in the construction of battered wives as a social problem--a social movement, professional and mass media attention, and appropriate gender images--were not present for battered husbands. The existence of the feminist movement and the battered women's movement helped establish battered wives as a social problem by providing co-optable social networks, by being flexible in its goals and structure, and because of the existence of incentives for sponsors to provide resources for the movement. Professional and mass media attention also helped institutionalize battered wives as a social problem. Finally, gender images supported the notion of women as appropriate and acceptable victims of violence by their husbands. These findings suggest that a climate that supported the existence and maintenance of one of these social problems could not, and has not, supported the institutionalization of the other.

> "For most of my married life I have been periodically beaten by my husband. What do I mean by 'beaten'? I mean that parts of my body have been hit violently and repeatedly, and that painful bruises, swelling, bleeding wounds, unconsciousness, and combinations of these things have resulted." (Letter from a battered wife, quoted in Martin 1976:1)

> "She was the first woman I loved, and I did love her! There were many nice things about her. ... But she could be mean as hell, and she'd hit me with anything she got her hands on. I just tried to protect myself--I never could really let her have it--no matter what. But finally, I had enough, and I just took a walk and never went back, except to see my girls. ... [S]he got married again ... and one night she killed him. I tell you, she was mean!" (quoted in Pagelow 1984:275-76)

Most people have heard stories like the first one. We read about wives who have been battered by their husbands in the newspapers, see movies about them on television. But what about the second account? How often have we heard or seen stories about husbands battered by their wives? Probably not often. Perhaps never.

However, in 1978, Suzanne Steinmetz was quoted in Time magazine as saying: "'The most unreported crime is not wife beating--it's husband beating'" (Time 1978:69). This article was a response to research findings reported by Steinmetz in a 1977 issue of the journal Victimology in which she argued that "husband beating constitutes a sizeable portion of marital violence" (501). She wrote that her data suggested not only that "the percentage of wives having used violence often exceeds that of husbands, but that wives also exceed husbands in the frequency with which these acts occur" (503).

At the same time that Steinmetz made her claims, feminists, social scientists and social service professionals were in the midst of a campaign to make battered wives the subject of public attention, a social problem. Shelters had been established, attempts were being made to change public responses to battered wives, and the issue was on its way to being institutionalized as a social problem. The road to recognition of battered wives was not an easy one, but the movement was successful in forcing the construction of a social problem called "battered wives."

Battered wives were recognized as a social problem in the 1970s. The first type of violence among family members to be made into a social problem had been child abuse, which was discovered in the 1960s. Elder abuse, identified as problematic in the 1980s, was the third major form of family violence to succeed as a social problem. As noted earlier, Steinmetz claimed in the late 1970s that there were a considerable number of battered husbands. Yet while her claims received a good deal of attention at first, battered husbands have not yet been recognized and institutionalized as a social problem.

Given the relative success of attempts to transform other forms of family violence into social problems, the failure of battered husbands as a social problem raises a number of issues. Perhaps the most obvious question is "Why?" What is it about the concept of battered husbands that has so far prevented it from being recognized as an issue deserving and requiring public attention? Does it have something to do with the apparent contradiction between being a man and getting battered? Or is it linked to the fact that there has been no battered men's movement, or even a men's liberation movement, that has taken up the cause of battered husbands? Does it have to do with the "fact" that there are no battered husbands? (Few have come forward; there has been no research on a sample of them.) These questions are the subject of this analysis.

While a great deal of attention has been paid to how concerns are successfully transformed into social problems, little attention has focused on failures in social problem construction. However, this can be an important area for study because it highlights what is needed for success, these elements presumably being absent in unsuccessful cases.

This analysis considers the influence of a social movement, professional and mass media attention, and gender images in the construction of a social problem. The unsuccessful case of husband battering is compared to the successful wife battering problem. After

reviewing the relevant literature and outlining the methods used in the analysis, I present my results and offer some conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In analyzing why battered husbands have failed as a social problem, it is important to consider how social problems are constructed, how social movements are related to social problems, and how other forms of family violence have been recognized as social problems.

Social Problems

Because it removes attention from the "objective" existence of a putative condition and emphasizes the process of social problem construction, the constructionist perspective (Best 1989; Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 1977; Schneider 1985) is used to analyze the development of the issues of battered husbands and wives. From this theoretical perspective, and for the purposes of this analysis, the actual existence of wives and husbands who are battered by their spouses is, in large part, irrelevant. What is at issue are the attempts that have been made to establish "battered wives" and "battered husbands" as social problems. How, for example, have the issues been framed? What kinds of assertions have been made?

Spector and Kitsuse (1977) provided the first major explication of the constructionist perspective on social problems. They define social problems as the "activities of groups or individuals making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" Spector and Kitsuse 1977:759, italics removed). Social problems become claims-making activities rather than conditions. For Spector and Kitsuse, the main problem is to account for the development, character, and continuation of claims-making and responding endeavors (1977). Whether the condition "objectively" exists is of no concern here because "'social problems are what people think they are'" (Spector and Kitsuse 1977:73). It is the definitional process that is to be analyzed. A goal of this

perspective is to look at the "viability rather than the validity of ... claims and whether such claims are accepted, rejected or altered as they move through interactional networks" (Schneider 1984:ix).

More recently, Best has suggested a distinction between "strict" and "contextual" constructionisms (1989). Contextual constructionists focus on claims-making but recognize that they are making some assumptions about social conditions, arguing that this approach locates claims-making in the social context in which it takes place (Best 1989). This means, for example, that the validity of claims about battered husbands and wives may also be analyzed. Reference to social conditions may help explain why some claims receive attention or shape policy and why they emerge when they do (Best 1989). For Best, it is important to understand what leads claimants to voice objections to particular conditions, what causes media notice and ratification of certain claims, and what makes the public respond to some reports/claims and not others (1990). Examining the content of claims can be combined with looking at claims-making activities themselves to provide a more complete picture of the social problem construction process. Because claims both define and shape problems (Best 1990), what is being claimed is as important as how the claims are being made and what reactions to them are. Ball and Lilly maintain that conditions cannot be ignored entirely because they may have an influence on the activities involved in problem definition (1982). As Loseke contends, "social problem concern is mobilized, intervention justified, and policy designed on the basis of social problem images" (1989:202). These images are often promoted (or countered) by a social movement.

Social Movements

Social movements can be analyzed as an example of the social problem making process (Schneider 1985). The relationship between a social problem and a social movement is often an intimate one. Mauss, in fact, argues that social problems are social movements (1975). Since Spector and Kitsuse (1977) define social problems as claims-making activities, the

distinction may, in fact, be artificial. The resource mobilization perspective on social movements is particularly relevant when analyzing social problems because it does not rely on changes in objective circumstances (here, e.g., an increase in the number of battered husbands or wives) to explain the emergence of a social movement/problem.

The resource mobilization approach to social movements views social movements as the result of long-term changes in group resources, organization, and opportunities available for collective action rather than as a reaction to significant changes in objective circumstances (Taylor and Rupp 1991). It stresses structural conditions that facilitate the expression of grievances. Here, public discontent follows from, rather than causes, movement agitation. Social problem creation is the task of organizations formed with that purpose in mind (Tierney 1979). A social movement may create grievances rather than simply responding to them (McCarthy and Zald 1977).

A social problem claims-making campaign generally involves the formation of an interest group which makes claims about the condition, attempts to capture and hold public attention, and to provoke an official response to the problem. In order to be successful, a movement must organize, pool and wield resources effectively (Wood and Jackson 1982). Spector and Kitsuse suggest that: "Other things being equal, groups that have more membership, greater constituency, more money, greater discipline, and organization will be more effective in pressing their claims than groups that lack these attributes" (1973:149).

Larger social structures and historical changes allow for the possibility of a movement and shape its agenda (Adam 1987). The social context is an important element of any social problem. As ideologies and perceptions of reality vary across individuals and groups, as well as across historical periods, different social problems achieve public recognition (Ross and Staines 1972; also see Gusfield 1981). This notion is important to the area of family violence because it is generally

assumed that these situations have existed throughout history, but have only recently come to be seen as social problems. Ross and Staines suggest that there are three principal actors involved in the making of a public issue: the media, which is critical in providing visibility; officialdom, which shapes the issue and controls the agenda; and private interest groups, which have some power to create issues and also to prevent conditions from becoming issues (1972). All three of these actors have been involved in varying capacities in the social construction of family violence as a social problem.

Family Violence

There has been a virtual explosion in attention to violence among intimates, particularly family members, over the past three decades. Here, I restrict my attention to the general process of making family violence into a social problem.

Writing about child and wife abuse, as well as incest, Breines and Gordon (1983) cite a number of factors that contributed to the emergence of these issues as social problems. First, violence, at these times, was seen as a symptom of "crisis" in the family. Attitudes of permissiveness and child-centered parenthood also made violence less tolerable. At about the same time, the women's movement brought private issues into the public eye and renewed critical scrutiny of the family. A culture of self-disclosure similarly led to a decrease in privacy about personal lives. Finally, abusers could be seen as victims who needed help because the society was at a low point in religion-based moralism and a high point in environmentalist social thought.

An important factor in the making of family violence, in whatever form, as a social problem is a view of the family as an institution that should be subject to public scrutiny, as well as a place that does not necessarily conform to the ideal image of love, happiness and tranquility. In fact, overcoming the notion of family privacy and autonomy remains a factor in studying violence among family members (Pagelow 1984). Making

family violence a social problem required gaining acceptance of the idea that the family is a place where violence can take place and of the idea that this violence should be regulated by public institutions. Declining attention to the issue is associated with calls for a return to a more private family life and for the state to refrain from intervening in the family (Pleck 1987).

These kinds of factors, as well as others more specific to the issues of husband and wife battering, help explain why it is that one has become a social problem and the other has not. After reviewing the methods used in this analysis, I discuss my findings on this subject.

METHODS

In attempting to account for the failure of battered husbands as a social problem, I compared the claims-making process and other developments concerning this issue with those that successfully constructed battered wives as a social problem. This is an application of the comparative method: identifying the similarities and differences between two cases (Ragin 1987). This method provides a means for answering such questions as: What are the different combinations of conditions that are associated with these two processes and outcomes? How do these different conditions fit together to produce differing outcomes?

Using the case-oriented method of comparison it is possible to analyze the causes of outcomes--the historical origins of different paths of development (Ragin 1987). The goal of such analysis is to identify the differences that are responsible for contradictory outcomes. Here, that involves identifying the conditions that led to battered wives becoming a social problem and battered husbands, so far, failing to do so. The examination of differences and similarities in context makes it possible to understand how "different combinations of conditions have the same causal significance and how similar causal factors can operate in opposite directions" (Ragin 1987:49). After identifying the broad set of factors that led to the success of the movement to make battered wives a social

problem and fitting them into the "ideal" process of social problem construction, it is possible to see how those same factors have related to the failure of battered husbands as a social problem. This assumes that the issue of battered husbands would have succeeded if it had followed a process similar to that of battered wives (because that problem followed the theoretically "ideal" pattern of construction).

I chose to compare battered wives and battered husbands for two reasons. Because they occur in similar types of relationships (marital or quasi-marital) and among people with similar statuses (spouses or peer intimates), a comparison of responses to claims about these two types of abuse will provide a way to look at how other factors led to differing outcomes. That is, given these two similarities between the issues, what is it that led to one becoming a social problem and the other failing?

The analysis considers the development of the issues of wife and husband battering across time. To outline the climate in which claims about battered wives first emerged, traditional attention to the issue provided the background for the analysis. The 1974 publication of Erin Pizzey's book, Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear, was taken as the turning point between traditional attention to the issue of wives who were being beaten by their husbands and the beginning of claims about a new problem called "battered wives." Professional literature appearing after this year is the major basis of the analysis. For battered husbands, the analysis begins with Steinmetz's 1977 article, "The Battered Husband Syndrome," which appeared in Victimology. These dates also provide anchoring points for the analysis of mass media attention to the two issues. Using the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature from 1974 to 1990, I counted the number of articles about wife and husband battering that have been indexed in this guide to gauge popular media attention to the issues.

There has been a proliferation of research and writing addressing the issue of battered wives since it was first raised. By using this

literature to identify the factors that resulted in successful claims-making on behalf of abused wives, it was possible to distinguish those that have been absent, or otherwise unsuccessful, in the process of attempting to make abused husbands, about whom much less has been written, a social problem. Comparing the construction of battered husbands to the theoretically ideal process of construction was important as well. The content of this body of literature provided the basis for ascertaining the specific factors involved in the attempts to make the two forms of spouse abuse into social problems.

My sample is neither random nor systematic. I simply attempted to include as many sources as possible. It was far easier to analyze all of the available work on battered husbands than to claim to have done so with battered wives. Given the sheer number of books and articles written on the latter topic, it would have been impossible to examine them all. However, I do believe I have included all of the major works on the subject. Because so much of what I did look at supported the same conclusions, I believe my analysis is adequate and appropriate to the subject at hand.

As noted earlier, the major part of this analysis is based on a thematic content analysis (Krippendorff 1980) of secondary data in the form of the existing literature on battered husbands and battered wives. Using Best (1989), Spector and Kitsuse (1977), Tierney (1982), and Studer (1984), as a basis for deciding what to look for in articles and books about wife and husband battering, I collected data on the two issues. Claims, their organization, and responses to them were analyzed in terms of the themes, concepts and processes suggested in the literature on the social construction of social problems. The process of analysis consisted of gleaning information related to the process of constructing these two issues as social problems from the content of the existing literature.

Content analysis provided a number of themes and concepts that help explain the success of wife battering as a social problem. I looked at

claims and counterclaims in terms of a variety of factors: what the writers saw the problem as; whether they saw a problem at all; what they believed reactions should be; why they believed there was a problem; and why they believed there had been, or had not been, attention to the issue. Since definitions are so important to the construction of social problems, I looked at specific definitional elements as well. These were: etiology, incidence, treatment, and other aspects such as who the victim was and who the perpetrator was perceived to be.

These concepts were then applied to the issue of husband battering, by looking at the literature that has been produced on that subject, to account for its lack of success as a social problem. Using battered wives as the comparison group, I have thus attempted to determine why battered husbands have failed to become institutionalized as a social problem.

FINDINGS

The problem of battered wives has been a successful competitor in the social problems marketplace. The success of this issue as a social problem can be attributed to the combination of a variety of processes: (1) organizational factors, as exemplified by the feminist movement in general and the battered women's movement in particular; (2) the proliferation of social science literature and research, as well as continued popular media attention; and (3) a stereotypic image of women that leads to their identification as "appropriate" and/or acceptable victims. These same factors have worked <u>against</u> the construction of battered husbands as a social problem. There has been no social movement, no organized response of any kind, on behalf of battered husbands. Social science responses, in large part, have been negative, and sustained mass media attention has been lacking. Finally, if gender images make the identification and definition of battered wives easier, they make similar perceptions of battered husbands all the more difficult.

Table 1 about here

The Social Movements

The women's liberation movement claimed that what happened between women and men in the privacy of their homes was political, thus setting the stage for the battered women's movement (Schechter 1982). Wife abuse was more than a potential social problem, more than another form of family violence. For feminists, it was an instance of a more general problem of violence against women. Schechter explains it this way:

> [W]ithout feminism, there might not have been a battered women's movement. Feminism, especially radical feminism, set the general social and political groundwork for women to label private problems as social ones. ... As the feminist movement uncovered layers of oppression and provided centers where women could meet and talk, battered women emerged and began to see their experiences as political ones. (1982:314)

Greenblat notes that it is "only in the relatively recent past that one can meaningfully talk of wife-beating as a 'social problem,' for historically the use of violence by husbands against wives has been not only tolerated but has been approved and legitimated" (1985:222). Schechter argues that women who have no political context through which to understand battering view it as an isolated struggle between themselves and their husbands (1982). If this violence can be seen to be caused by social relationships of power and domination, however, then it can be redefined as a social problem (Murray 1988). Consciousness-raising efforts on the part of feminists were instrumental in this instance of making the personal political.

The United States was not the only country in which feminists were influential in creating the problem of battered wives. Analyzing the development of the battered women's movement in Canada, Walker identifies four steps: efforts to make the issue visible, trying to get something done about it, a transformation and/or reorganization of the relations of the women's movement to the issue and to agencies/institutions of the state, and dissatisfaction and a re-examination provoked by the outcomes

of this enterprise (1990). Walker also suggests that "conceptual coordination," agreement with the state about what the problem is, is necessary to obtain resources and recognition (1990). In the course of this process in Canada, the issue became "family violence," which obscures the experience of women; wife battering came to be seen as a criminal act that is an outcome of society, both manufactured and manifested in the family (Walker 1990). Walker's analysis suggests that the process of claims-making and problem construction has been analogous in the United States and Canada. Dobash and Dobash argue that a similar process has also taken place in Great Britain (1987).

Tierney (1982) attributes the success of the battered women's movement to three factors related to the organization of the movement itself: a pre-existing organizational base for the movement, the movement's flexibility, and the existence of incentives for sponsors to provide resources (also see Johnson 1981; Loseke and Cahill 1984). These influences provide further evidence of how important an organized social movement can be to the success of an issue as a social problem (see Lucal 1991 for a more detailed discussion of these factors).

The lack of a social movement, while not dooming a potential social problem, does make construction more difficult: there is no organized effort to promote the issue as a problem. While there is a nascent men's movement, it has not been a voice for advocates of battered husbands. Its attention is focused elsewhere, on everything from child custody and support to a "romantic assertion of primitive masculinity in all its innocent strength and virtue" (Adler, Springen, Glick and Gordon 1991:49). It has not focused on male victims of spouse abuse.

Because there was no men's movement when the claims about battered husbands were first made, there was no existing organizational basis of support for the issue. There were no co-optable social networks for advocates of battered husbands to use to their advantage. There were no incentives for other professionals to get involved with the issue: large

number of battered husbands did not come forward seeking services. When viewed in light of the importance of feminist movement involvement in the construction of battered wives as a social problem, this lack of a social movement can be seen to have played a significant role in the failure of battered husbands as a social problem.

Social Science and Mass Media Attention

The increase in social science literature and research since the 1970s has also supported the subsistence of battered wives as a social problem (Studer 1984). Not until the Del Martin's Battered Wives (1976), a feminist analysis of the issue, was there a proliferation of research and literature specifically on battered wives (Studer 1984). A survey of professional attention to the issue showed that 290 articles on battered wives appeared in Sociological Abstracts between 1974 and 1990. Hatty argues that the social science literature has both accompanied and buttressed the rise of battered women as a social problem (1987). Kurz (1989) also points to the role of researchers, who provided statistical evidence of the extent of abuse, in making wife abuse a social problem.

The case of battered husbands has been significantly different in terms of attention given to the issue by social scientists. According to Pagelow (1984), nearly all writers who consider the question of husband versus wife battering conclude that the proportion of male victims is minuscule compared to female victims (which supports a contextual constructionist analysis [Best 1989]). Also significant is her observation that "since 1977 when the image of the 'battered husband syndrome' was publicized, there has not been a single report of scientific research on a sample of battered husbands" (Pagelow 1984:188). An examination of the sociological literature on the subject showed that the majority of attention to Steinmetz's claims has been negative (see, e.g., Berk, Berk, Loseke and Rauma 1983; Brush 1990; Dobash and Dobash 1981; Fields and Kirchner 1978; Pagelow 1984; Pleck, Pleck, Grossman and Bart

1977). (For support, see, e.g., Gelles and Straus 1988; McNeely and Robinson-Simpson 1987; Stets and Straus 1990.)

While professional/scientific attention and responses to claims are not necessary to the making of a social problem, they either enhance or diminish its credibility. Though there has by no means been a uniform response to wife battering from the social sciences, the responses have been sustained and persistent. Attention to battered husbands, on the other hand, has been uneven and mostly negative. A review of indexes of sociology journal articles produced just six articles on husband battering. This number suggests that battered husbands did not "catch on" with professionals the way battered wives did, making their chances of being promoted as a social problem slim. On the other hand, if, as Blumer (1971) suggests, sociologists respond to public interest when they address social problems, this finding is also an indication of the lack of public concern with the issue of battered husbands.

Like professional attention, popular media attention to battered wives has been helpful in establishing and maintaining it as a social problem. Tierney suggests that violence against wives was a good subject for the media because it was a "new" problem for the public; it was controversial and mixed violence and social relevance; and it provided a focal point for the discussion of issues such as feminism, inequality, and family life in the United States (1982). According to Schneider, it was a serious, timely issue (because of the women's liberation movement) that contained violence, but that could be handled in an entertaining way (1985). "Partly because of the growing organized support for the movement and partly because the wife-beating problem was a 'good subject' for the media, a significant increase in media coverage of battered wives took place after 1975" (Studer 1984:416). An examination of mass media coverage of battered wives shows how that coverage has waxed and waned since 1974. As indexed by Readers' Guide, the number of articles

appearing in a year has ranged from one in 1975-76 and 1981-82 to fourteen in 1989. Between 1974 and 1990, one-hundred-eighteen articles appeared.

Battered husbands have also received attention from the mass media. As Pagelow points out: "The very idea of husband battering seemed to titillate the collective imagination of the mass media" (1984:268). "The mass media were immediately attracted to this provocative idea and exploited it heavily, and very shortly, the notion ... had spread around the world" (Pagelow 1984:296). But after an initial flurry of attention to the issue, it virtually disappeared from the mass media. For example, between 1977 and 1990, Readers' Guide lists only three articles on husband beating. (While I only considered the print media, it is interesting to note that Phil Donahue devoted an episode of his television talk show to battered husbands in fall 1991. Battered wives, of course, frequently appear in these media.)

Professional and mass media attention to the issue of battered wives has been instrumental in its creation and continuation as an identified social problem. Along with the social movement/organizational factors, this attention has been crucial to the construction of the social problem called "battered wives." Both of these factors, however, are related to gender images. For battered wives to become a social problem, wife beating had to come to be seen as something that was problematic. Stereotypical gender images of women and men were essential to this process. These same gender images, conversely, have worked against the definition of battered husbands as a social problem.

Gender Images

If women are seen as passive, dependent and weak, then it is rather easy to accept their identification as potential victims of strong, assertive men. That is, the traditional images of women and men influence what kinds of claims can be made about them. Though the notions that women deserve to be beaten or that they actually enjoy it or bring it on themselves (Resick 1983) are antithetical to feminist principles, these

ideas do legitimate the existence of battered wives (that is, they are part of popular culture). If men are accepted as being aggressive and/or sometimes out of control, or as likely to use violence to assert their dominance/power and to get what they want, then women are going to be beaten. There is a long tradition of husbands being permitted to beat their wives to make them obey, to keep them in line (see, e.g., Davidson 1977).

As Steinmetz (1977) notes, there is no similar tradition of women beating their husbands. "To be violent," Straus (1977:448) argues, "is not unmasculine. But to be physically violent is unfeminine according to contemporary American standards." Violence by men is supported, in many contexts, by societal norms and standards. If women are not generally seen as potentially violent, then recognizing them as being as likely to hit their husbands as men are to hit their wives is difficult. It goes against traditional gender images.

To recognize battered husbands as a significant social problem requires at least implicit acknowledgement that men can be victims of acts perpetrated by women. While it may be easy for us to see men as potential victims of violent acts committed by other men, it is difficult to imagine them being victimized by women. "Victim" connotes a weak, passive person--an image antithetical to masculinity. We, as a society, are not inclined to see men that way; and men are reticent about naming themselves as victims of women's violence. Reluctance to "believe in" battered husbands then becomes a matter of subscribing to traditional images of women and men. It is also a matter of questioning the prevalence of female aggression and assertion of dominance (through violence) in our society (Dobash, Dobash, Wilson and Daly 1992), which may be based not on stereotypes but on everyday experience and/or the influence of feminism.

To extend this notion of gender images as a major contributing factor in the failure of husband battering as a social problem, I analyzed the (small) existing professional and popular media attention to battering

in lesbian and gay male couples. While lesbian battering was reluctantly named as a problem in the lesbian community in 1986 with the publication of Naming the Violence (Lobel, ed.), "for violence in the relationships of gay men, there is even greater silence and denial" (Reed 1989). It has been suggested that for a gay man to admit that another man abuses him "'would mean he was really a "sissy"'" (The Advocate 1986). In their book, Men Who Beat the Men Who Love Them, Island and Letellier argue that "gay men who have experienced violence at the hands of their lovers may be unable to see themselves as victims, simply because they are men" (1991: 102). They also point out that "gay men's domestic violence forces us to look at some men as victims, which contradicts all the stereotypes we have in our society about men" (16). This exploratory analysis supports the contradictions between masculinity and being a victim; it also suggests that men in general are reluctant to identify themselves as victims. When the perpetrator is a woman, this hesitancy could be expected to be even greater.

For wife beating to come to be seen as a social problem, it was necessary to combine traditional ideas about, and images of, women and men with new ideas that suggested that violence against women was unacceptable and harmful. That is, their dependent status and their presumed passive nature made wives, as women, acceptable and appropriate victims of violence by their husbands. In this way, traditional gender images were involved in the successful construction of battered wives a social problem.

Husbands, on the other hand, are not "normal" victims. More specifically, dependency has been a key notion in identifying victims of family violence. Children, the elderly, and women fit more easily into this "dependent" category than men do. Our image of what it is to be a man militates against the inclusion of an image of large numbers of men in positions of dependency that lead to victimization by their wives. Webster and O'Toole (1990) note that the dependency of women was stressed

in professional and lay definitions of mistreatment, and that husband battering supporters also "depicted the husband-victim as disabled or much older than the wife" (54). For example: "A wife need not be an Amazon to abuse her husband. Sometimes a woman is physically stronger than here husband because the man is sick, handicapped, or much older than his wife" (Langley and Levy 1977:190). However, if, as it appears, the dependent husband is the exceptional image, then it will be difficult to believe/imagine that there might be thousands or millions of battered husbands. For these reasons, then, gender images have worked against the identification and promotion of battered husbands as a social problem.

CONCLUSION

Two factors stand out in the process of constructing battered wives as a social problem: (1) the existence of a social movement on behalf of wives being battered by their husbands and (2) traditional gender images of women and men that are conducive to the identification of women as victims of violence by men. These factors were important in the capturing and maintenance of public and professional attention--in short: to getting battered wives on the public agenda and keeping them there.

This analysis has shown that the factors that facilitated the construction of battered wives as a social problem worked against battered husbands becoming a social problem. There has been no movement for battered husbands; more generally, no group has taken up their cause. The prevailing gender images of women and men also make it difficult for us to fit husbands into a victim-of-family-violence category: they do not fit the image. This disjuncture has also worked against the acceptance and success of battered husbands as a social problem.

This comparison of a successful social problem to an (as yet) unsuccessful attempt to create one also sheds light on what the successful construction of a social problem in American society involves. A social movement or interest group--some group of advocates that makes it their business to see that a problem is attended to--is crucial. Claims-making

is not enough; the process of making a social problem requires more. Also of major importance in the creation of a social problem is fitting it into existing frameworks for viewing problems. Husband battering was not a form of family violence whose victims fit easily into such a framework. That is, the continued prevalence of traditional gender images means that most men are not seen to fit the prevailing image of what a victim looks like. While battered wives started out as a social problem that questioned the very structure of our society, the problem has been reformulated, much to the chagrin of many feminists, as an individualized and professionalized issue (e.g., Johnson 1981). This reframing has allowed battered wives to conform to the American way of viewing social problems, thus keeping it on the agenda.

On a related note, the failure of battered husbands points to the inability of a strict social constructionist analysis (Best 1989) to account for the fate of an issue. Claims were made about battered husbands, but, for the reasons cited here, they did not lead to the construction of a social problem. However, responses to these claims were likely affected by the lack of empirical evidence of the existence of battered husbands. If there are, as Steinmetz has been quoted as claiming (see Pagelow 1984), a quarter of a million battered husbands, where are they? And why has no one studied a sample of them? This lack of evidence, whatever its cause (e.g., there are not that many battered husbands or they have not come forward), is a contributing factor in the lack of professional and mass media attention, the absence of a group of advocates and/or a social movement, and the persistence of gender images that do not support the identification of battered husbands.

A mix of tradition, in the form of gender images, and a social climate favoring transformation and change, which gave rise to the second wave of feminism, supported the claims and activities which made battered wives a social problem. At the same time, these traditional gender images and the recognition that women were being treated badly as a result of a

social structure favoring men, a product of feminism, militated against the rise of battered husbands as a social problem. Because of the fundamentally gendered context of violence between spouses, a climate that favored the recognition and maintenance of a social problem of "battered wives" could not do the same for "battered husbands".

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Table One

Factors Involved in the Success and Failure of
Battered Husbands and Battered Wives as Social Problems

	Social Movement	Media Attention	Gender Images
BATTERED WIVES	Feminist movement resources (networks, money, etc.); battered women's movement specifically aimed at addressing the problem	Continually studied and reported on since 1974 Often in the mass media	Women make "good" victims, based on stereotypical images of dependency, etc.
BATTERED HUSBANDS	Fledgling men's movement, attention focused elsewhere	No study of a sample of them Little attention since 1977	Difficulty of seeing men as victims that stems from stereotypical images of strength, independence, etc.